

1-1-2001

## **Guy de Maupassant**

Jim Millhorn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/allfaculty-peerpub>

---

### **Original Citation**

Guy de Maupassant in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Research, Artistry, & Scholarship at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Peer-Reviewed Publications by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact [jschumacher@niu.edu](mailto:jschumacher@niu.edu).

Guy de Maupassant

French writer, 1850-1893

Maupassant was a master of the short story, and also an acclaimed novelist and journalist.

Mentored by Gustave Flaubert and aligned early in his career with Emile Zola, Maupassant is most often grouped with the naturalist school. Although he was a deft and elegant stylist, much of his writing concentrated on the seamier side of life. As a writer he focused exclusively on the art and craft with which an object was depicted regardless of how sordid or coarse the subject matter. This daring and amoral aesthetic assured Maupassant's notoriety, and he repeatedly tested and pushed the limits of official condemnation throughout his career.

Maupassant's first and only encounter with the censor occurred at the onset of his career, and happened in a peculiar and round-about way. In the late 1870's Maupassant was in the employ of the Ministry of Education as an administrative assistant, and honing his skills as a writer under the tutelage of Flaubert. The latter encouraged Maupassant and introduced him to a number of publishers and editors. Through Flaubert's intervention Maupassant met Catulle Mendès, editor of the literary journal *Republique des lettres* (Republic of Letters), and with whom Maupassant had a long and fruitful association. In 1876 Mendès agreed to publish, under the pseudonym of Valmont, Maupassant's poem, *Au Bord de l'eau* (The Water's Edge). The poem appeared without incident, although its subject matter clearly invited controversy. *Au Bord de l'eau* is the tale of an obsessive love affair between an oarsman and a washerwoman in which the focus is on unbridled sensual and carnal pleasure. Eventually the couple destroy themselves in their pursuit of sex. Maupassant's own estimate was telling, "My poem, chaste in language, is completely immoral and indecent in images and subject matter."

Maupassant's difficulties with the law arose when the poem was reprinted in his own name with

the title *Une Fille* (A Girl) in the *Revue moderne et naturaliste* (Modern and Naturalist Review) in November 1879. Maupassant later claimed the poem was printed without his permission, but the damage was done. Maupassant and Auguste Allien were charged with *outrage à la morale publique* (outrage to public morals) by the Office of the Public Prosecutor of the small Parisian suburb of Etampes on December 22, 1879. That charges were filed in Etampes illustrates one of the quirks of censorship prosecution under the Third Republic. It so happened that the *Revue moderne et naturaliste* was printed in Etampes, and that according to the law the printer, Auguste Allien, was considered equally liable along with the publisher and the author of the offensive piece. The authorities had difficulties in locating Maupassant in Paris, and it was not until February that he caught wind of the subpoena and appeared voluntarily before the court on the 14th. Although it remains unclear what transpired at the initial deposition, Maupassant took immediate steps afterward to organize his defense. In a revealing set of letters to Flaubert, Maupassant confessed that he was less concerned with incarceration or injury to his literary career than jeopardizing his position and livelihood at the Ministry of Education.

Maupassant plead with Flaubert to write a letter in his defense and place it in the influential and widely read newspaper, *Le Gaulois*. Flaubert who was loath to step forward in the public arena complied with Maupassant's request, and in addition penned a number of private letters to influential people. Flaubert's strategy was to avoid legalistic argument, Maupassant had hired an advocate, but to employ sarcasm and ridicule in arguing that the state had no business in dictating artistic expression. *Le Gaulois* published Flaubert's letter on February 21, 1880. It opened with Flaubert's praise of his "disciple," and immediately engaged the question of why the charge was filed in Etampes three years after the initial publication of the poem in Paris. Flaubert explicitly asked, "Is there one kind of justice for Paris and another for the provinces?"

For further irony Flaubert recalled the censorship trial of *Madame Bovary* which “received enormous publicity and for which I attribute three quarters of my success.” The brunt of Flaubert’s charge, however, was that it was the nature of the state, which he maintained remained the same in essentials from monarchy to empire to republic, to command a “monopoly of taste,” and that if the authorities were indeed able to exercise aesthetic control then there would be no Shakespeare, Rabelais, Voltaire, Goethe, Byron, etc. Flaubert concluded that it was unthinkable that a poem could provoke criminal charges, but added, “Yet, who knows? The earth has its limits, but human stupidity is infinite?”

Flaubert’s bravura performance had its intended effect, and the charge was promptly dropped for lack of evidence on January 28, 1880. Maupassant was clearly relieved to be rid of the ordeal, yet throughout the remainder of his career he was fearless in courting controversy and in his adamant refusal to relinquish any editorial control over his work. He recognized that some publications were more appropriate than others, especially for racier items of which he wrote many and which covered a remarkable range of topics. Particularly favored was the literary journal, *Gil Blas*, that prided itself on its shady reputation, and was prosecuted and fined for overstepping the bounds of decency numerous times. On two separate occasions Maupassant brought suits against parties that he felt had restricted access or maligned his writing. In the first instance, Maupassant protested against the huge publisher Hachette, who monopolized book stall train stations, for refusing to stock his novel *Une Vie* ( A Life). Maupassant pursued the case all the way to the Chamber of Deputies where a petition was presented on May 28, 1883 arguing that Hachette was exercising de facto censorship of the novel. When the Minister of Public Works, whose responsibility extended to railroad stations, was questioned he would neither affirm or deny that Hachette was practicing censorship, but did add that his understanding was

that certain passages in *Une Vie* were “indelicate, to put it mildly.” The Chamber voted overwhelmingly not to act, but Maupassant received considerable coverage and sales were brisk. Late in his career (1888) he was outraged that the newspaper *Le Figaro* extensively edited an essay, *Le Roman* (The Novel), without seeking his permission. Maupassant was not immune to editorial advice, but it was inconceivable to him that an artist would surrender editorial control without consent. Eventually, the suit was dropped after *Le Figaro* printed an apology, yet Maupassant never published with the newspaper again. Maupassant repeatedly pushed the envelope of what was acceptable, and many of his finest stories are marked by a brutal sensuality. However, legal authorities of the Third Republic distinguished sharply between works of art and popular writings aimed at a broad public. It was Maupassant’s unquestioned stature as an artist that shielded him from further prosecution.

Jim Millhorn

### **Writings by Maupassant**

*Au Bord de l'eau* reprinted in *Correspondance: Gustave Flaubert-Guy de Maupassant*, Paris: Flammarion, 1993.

*Une Fille* reprinted in Yvan Leclerc, *Crimes Écrits: La Littérature en Procès au XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (Writing Crimes: Literature on Trial in the Nineteenth Century), Paris: Plon, 1991.

*Contes et Nouvelles* (Collected Stories and Novels), Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1974, 1979.

### **Further Reading**

Jacques Hamelin, *Hommes de Lettres Inculpés: Mérimée, Barbey d'Aurévilly, Maupassant, Flaubert, Baudelaire, les Goncourt [et] Diderot* (Indicted Men of Letters), Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1956.

Francis Steegmuller, *Maupassant: A Lion in the Path*, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1949.